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SUBJECT: OPPONENTS OF REFORM ALREADY BALKING AT JORDAN'S  
NEW CABINET

REF: A. AMMAN 2890

[1](#)B. AMMAN 2851

Classified By: Charge David Hale, Reasons, 1.4 (B) & (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Public opposition to the new cabinet from southern tribesmen in parliament comes as no surprise ) they loathe the Palestinian reformists who are the stars in the new government ) but has rattled PM Badran and some of the targets of this attack. The cabinet brings together an exceptionally strong economic team, much needed to accelerate Jordan's economic reform effort. Badran stressed to Charge his commitment to significant political reform in the year ahead, but is seeking safety nets and deliverables to insulate some sectors of society from economic shocks coming from reform. On the foreign policy front, FM Qasrawi has shifted from his predecessor's strident tone, extending olive branches to Arab neighbors. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) The King's hand-picked reform cabinet reached the three-day mark on April 12. Significant ) but predictable ) resistance from southern tribesmen in parliament has rattled the cabinet team. Prime Minister Badran and four key economic ministers ) water, industry and trade, planning, and finance ) all expressed to Charge in the last twenty four hours their concern about the public stand of these 35 traditionalist MPs against the new government. Finance Minister Awadallah privately accused GID Chief Saad Khayr of stoking the opposition fires against a reform government that is not to his liking. The southerners' complaints focus on the lack of consultation on formation of the government, the absence of any significant southerner in the cabinet, and their impression that the economic team is "out of touch" with the average Jordanian. Cabinet members privately retort that part of the reform process is a move away from cumbersome geographic balance in the cabinet in favor of decentralization-to-come. As for the economic team, they are exceptionally dynamic private sector leaders, and predominantly Palestinian ) anathema on both counts to East Bank tribesmen. The fact that opposition in parliament comes from the loyal parliamentary backbone of the outgoing Fayez cabinet (and not the Islamic Action Front) would confirm that the Badran government (and the King by extension) is seen as firmly committed to a path of reform that will remove the political tools which keep these backward anti-reformists in place.

[1](#)3. (C) The cabinet team is debating internally how to respond. The King convened a representative sample of parliamentary leaders on April 12 to emphasize his commitment to reform and expectation of support. (He had planned this move weeks earlier.) According to Awadallah, PM Badran wants to stick to their initial plan of calling the recessed parliament into emergency session in June, for a confidence vote and continued work on pending legislation. But Badran, adding up potential opposition of 35 southerners and 20 Islamists, told Charge he needs "deliverables" by then to win support. Awadallah argues it would be better to convene parliament now and get a quick confirmation derived from MPs' loyalty to the King, rather than risk facing the House with meager results to show in a few months' time. As he will advocate in an upcoming visit to Washington, the government will put in place a comprehensive three year plan for pension reform, ending subsidies, reducing debt service burdens, and accelerating privatization (septel). Judging from Charge's initial meetings with the economic team, the will and executive capacity exists to accomplish these goals, perhaps for the first time in Jordan. Less evident are the political skills which will be needed to handle parliament. Deputy Prime Minister el-Tal will be the point man for dealing with the House, but alone he may lack the necessary heft. Jordanian officials will continue to seek foreign assistance as "insulation" to meet unfounded capital expenditure needs, a phasing out of fuel subsidies, and a possible modest increase in low-end wages.

[1](#)4. (C) Most ministers we have met so far remain optimistic about the team they have joined, describing the initial cabinet session as showing the members' sense of cohesion and focus on reform. PM Badran reiterated to Charge that significant political reforms would be carried out in the year ahead. However, of the seven ministerial committees

formed, none is exclusively given the mandate to work on democratization.

15. (C) On the foreign policy front, new Foreign Minister Qasrawi has begun to work on Jordan's Arab relations, damaged by his strident predecessor. In press interviews, he has discussed his plans to travel to Baghdad soon to work on that relationship (Mulki had also intended to visit Iraq upon formation of a transitional government) and made conciliatory statements about other neighbors. Badran also announced he would travel soon to Arab states "to clear the atmosphere."

16. (C) Comment: East Banker resistance to the Palestinian-flavored, reform-oriented cabinet came as no surprise, as socio-economic and political reforms threaten to dilute their power and deprive them of their traditional tools to exercise control. More surprising has been criticism from liberals, some of whom have openly challenged the way the cabinet was formed behind closed palace doors. The ongoing debate highlights some of the dilemmas this reformist king faces: on the one hand, reforms undermine his loyal base of support before any organized reform constituency exists to replace it as a bulwark against extremists; on the other hand, the absence of a truly representative parliament and a strong grassroots democratization movement compels the King to continue to direct the reform process from above, a situation he readily acknowledges privately is incapable of sustaining true reform. However, if the national agenda and decentralization commissions deliver, the regime has a credible plan to a) obtain "buy in" to comprehensive reforms from a broad spectrum of society and b) initiate more "bottom up" reforms. As Jordan maneuvers through this difficult process, at a time of regional turmoil, its leaders deserve our continued encouragement and support. Baghdad minimize considered.

HALE